

CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY COHESION ORGANICALLY AND STRATEGICALLY

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Abstract

Numerous initiatives have emerged in the wake of increasing community unrest in America. Some training initiatives have taken a problem-solving approach to help communities de-escalate tension and mitigate ongoing conflict, while others have taken a proactive approach to equip communities to plan in advance of unrest. The Academy Initiative, a program under the Divided Communities Project (“DCP”) housed at The Ohio State University Michael E. Moritz College of Law, is an example of the latter that seeks to empower community leaders with conflict planning and conflict resolution skills ahead of significant unrest. Focusing on DCP’s Academy Initiative, this Article seeks to trace the various impacts of this type of training on three distinct communities. Through interviews with community leaders in these three different localities, this Article analyzes the context of each community prior to their participation in the Academy Initiative and draws out the benefits and challenges that have emerged as a result of participation. Taking a comparative case study approach, the focus is on synthesizing the similarities and differences of these communities to identify what local leaders can learn from outsiders versus what community leaders must cultivate from

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within to create stronger community cohesion. The findings suggest that collective leadership and a shared vision to make the community better, and the willingness to work with others towards that aim, is something that must be built locally. Once there is an identified group of local leaders invested in the work, outside experts can provide the insights and ideas on how to increase perspective taking, improve communication among local leadership and across the community, and to get community buy-in broadly. Strengthening the societal fabric through both organic and strategic means are necessary to mend the tears in today's divided communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, hate crimes in the United States were the highest it had been in more than two decades.¹ Coupled with a pandemic that is disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minority groups both in health and economic impact,² a major moment of racial reckoning has arisen after a series of police murders of Black Americans. In an effort to find new ways to support the movement toward justice and equity, there has been a push to acknowledge the past and to find productive ways to deal with systemic inequity.³ Some have called for transitional justice, such as using truth commissions to confront structural racism holistically,⁴ and in June 2020, Representative Barbara Lee introduced a bill to establish a U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation.⁵ Others have proposed dismantling systemic racism in silos, such as in the systems of education, health care, and employment, among others, and put their focus more locally. For example, the state of Maryland has established a Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission to

¹ See Michael Balsamo, *Hate Crimes in U.S. Reach Highest Level in More than a Decade*, AP NEWS (Nov. 16, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/hate-crimes-rise-FBI-data-ebbcadca8458aba96575da905650120d> [<https://perma.cc/3PS7-LGLB>].

² See Don Bambino Geno Tai et al., *The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the United States*, 72 CLINICAL INFECTIOUS DISEASES 705 (2021).

³ See Christina Lu, *Does America Need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission?*, FOREIGN POL'Y, (Apr. 29, 2021, 5:30 PM) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/29/united-states-transitional-justice-truth-reconciliation-commission/> [<https://perma.cc/GNT4-8S4H>].

⁴ See Kelebogile Zvobgo, *Justice for George Floyd Has Only Just Begun*, FOREIGN POL'Y, (Apr. 20, 2021, 10:02 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/20/george-floyd-killing-chauvin-trial-guilty/> [<https://perma.cc/864R-QJV5>].

⁵ See, e.g., Urging the Establishment of a U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation, H.R. Con. Res. 100, 116th Cong (2020).